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Death Immortalized

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By GERRY CANAVAN OCTOBER 27, 2016



Not Space Race Victory, but Space Race Defeat

“The Earth,” the voice of Leonard Nimoy gravely reminds the player who successfully researches the science of Rocketry in the classic computer game *Civilization IV*, “is the cradle of the mind — but one cannot eternally live in a cradle.” The quote is from Konstantin Eduardovich Tsiolkovsky, the father of the Soviet space program, but after 400 hours of playing *Civilization*, the only voice I can hear is Spock’s.

Like decades of science fiction before it, *Civilization* tells us that The Future of Mankind is Out There. In every iteration of the game since the first *Civilization* (1991), the solar system Alpha Centauri represents the nonviolent way to win, a “Space Race Victory” that aligns the project of US “national greatness” (and its various imperial-corporate applications) with the apotheosis of the species as such. This vision of the future has by now become so familiar and habitual as to almost go without saying.

For as long as any of us has been alive, space has always been what comes next: the Moon, then Mars, then the asteroid belt and the moons of Jupiter, and on and on, to Alpha Centauri and beyond.

From its beginnings, science fiction has tended to entangle the future of the human species with the future of its imperial civilizations:

As John Rieder put it in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008), “science fiction comes into visibility first in those countries most heavily involved in imperialist projects — France and England — and then gains popularity in the United States, Germany, and Russia as those countries also enter into more and more serious imperial competition.” In the science fiction of the postwar period, the West’s “consensus cosmogony” — science fiction editor and critic Donald A. Wollheim’s term — was a general agreement among midcentury futurists about the intergalactic Empire/Republic/Federation that was the inevitable and rightful destiny of the human race. As the *Committee for the Abolition of Outer Space* described that consensus future in its manifesto last year:

We have been lied to, subjected to a cruel and chilly lie, one so vast and total it’s no longer fully perceivable but has turned into the unseen substrate of everyday life. It’s a *political* lie. They told us that outer space is beautiful.

But this consensus has not been displaced. The lie still sings beautifully. I still perk up

every time SETI has another false alarm. I was filled with glee with the discovery this summer that Proxima Centauri, one of the three stars making up the Alpha Centauri system, not only has a planet but an Earthlike one, in the habitable zone.

It's finally happening. Space Race Victory in ten turns, twenty, tops.

HOW does the rise of China transform the consensus cosmogony?

As China has settled into the role of global superpower over the last decade, we have seen exactly what Rieder might have predicted: a sharp increase in SF production and consumption in China. Novels like Han Song's *2066: Red Star Over America* (2000) and Chan Koonchung's *The Fat Years* (2009) imagine Chinese supremacy over a collapsed and decadent West, while Hollywood increasingly co-produces blockbusters like *Looper*, *Warcraft*, and *Iron Man 3* with an eye to the Chinese market (often even released with special sequences filmed only for that market). But no Chinese writer of SF has matched the tectonic global impact of Liu Cixin's 2006-2010 "Three-Body" trilogy, which has now been completely translated into English with the September 2016 U.S. release of *Death's End*. The "Three-Body" trilogy imagines a category that games like *Civilization* and shows like *Star Trek* never really anticipated: not Space Race Victory, but Space Race Defeat. A universe in which everybody loses.

The Three-Body Problem was a breakthrough moment for SF in translation, having been nominated for the Nebula Award and winning the Hugo Award in 2015. The first book primarily concerns the actions of a physicist, Ye Wenjie, who escaped persecution during the Cultural Revolution as a child and then later, as a dissident, was recruited into a SETI-like secret Chinese military project searching for aliens. Ye is embittered by her experiences — and utterly transformed by her reading of *Silent Spring* — and sends a message into outer space, detailing Earth's location, and asking for assistance from aliens. The message is received by the Trisolarian civilization — living at Alpha Centauri just four light years away — but a Trisolarian pacifist, who is similarly aghast at the behavior of her own species, destroys all record of the message, replying to Ye

only to tell her not to write again, lest her message trigger an invasion fleet. In the intervening eight years the message has taken to travel there and back, however, Ye has only grown more embittered; she replies anyway, deliberately triggering that invasion. The first book ends with the Trisolaran fleet on its way to Earth, set to arrive in about two centuries, having sent ahead devices called *sophons* which both interfere with human scientific experimentation and radically and maximally surveil the activities of the entire planet at all times.

Earlier this year I reviewed *The Dark Forest*, the second book in the trilogy, for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*; then, as now, I recommend that you read the first two books in the series before this review. The issue is not narrative suspense — though the books are certainly a delight on that level — but the three books form a chain of reasoning that one should pass through organically and in the proper order. The imminent Earth-Trisolaran conflict that ends *The Three-Body Problem* becomes, in *The Dark Forest*, the occasion for a lengthy rumination on the Fermi Paradox, and our inability to depict the signs of intelligent alien life that — if the consensus cosmogony is true and it is the fate of intelligent species like ours to develop godlike technological prowess on a galactic scale — we *ought* to be able to detect.

It is a mystery that we can't find anyone else, a mystery that implies the optimistic future of the consensus cosmogony is likely somehow wrong. The fact that we can't find any aliens in the heavens suggests we'll never get to the stars either.

At the end of *The Dark Forest*, we understand the answer to the paradox: the universe is quiet because evolution produces monsters, not saints, and there is nothing Out There that is worth the risk of running afoul of any other species. When a planetary civilization does, stupidly, announce itself to the universe, they bring down an apocalyptic preemptive strike from one of the technologically advanced super-civilizations hiding out somewhere in the galaxy.

The solution to the problem of the Trisolaran invasion thereby becomes a perverse game of chicken between the two races. It's Mutually Assured Destruction on a galactic scale: each has the capacity to instantaneously destroy both Earth's sun and the Alpha Centauri system at any time, just by saying hello. Deterrence forces them into détente.

The Dark Forest thus ends on a brutally anti-utopian note, despite the nominal peace enforced at the edge of apocalypse: it turns out there is nothing outside Darwin, outside game-theory, outside imperialism, outside race-hate. There are no pacifistic victories to be had in Liu's version of *Civilization*, no *Star Trek* future of peace and mutual cooperation. The one remaining glimmer of political hope in the book, in fact, is really only the knowledge that there's still a third book in the trilogy, and that perhaps we're only lingering for a while in maximum pessimism on our way to some other place.

BUT the ride is far from over, as the "Table of Eras" at the start of *Death's End* immediately confirms. To the reader of *The Three-Body Problem* and *The Dark Forest*, some of the terms will be immediately understandable, but the names of timescales quickly spiral into the inscrutable and the almost preposterously hyperbolic: the

Broadcast Era (2272-2332), the Bunker Era (2333-2400), the Galaxy Era (2273-unknown), the Black Domain Era for DX3906 System (2687-18906416), Timeline for Universe 647 (18906416-....). The lifelong reader of SF has the tools to immediately transmogrify this gibberish into hope: there is a galactic future after all, the cosmic cosmogony lives!

But the book immediately wrong-foots us again. The very first page of the novel, titled “Excerpt from the Preface to *A Past Outside of Time*,” is ethereal and oblique, and tells us we are reading the history of events that “didn’t occur in the past, aren’t taking place now, and will not happen in the future.” The unknown author of the document writes, mournfully, that they can only hope that the day will someday come when someone else is able to make use of the document.

“I suppose this ought to be called *history*,” this unnamed narrator writes. “But since all I can rely on is my own memory, it lacks the rigor of history.” Still, it’s something worth doing, even for someone who appears to have godlike personal powers, and who appears to inhabit a space-time geometry totally unlike our own:

I move the sun to the west, and as the angle of the light shifts,
the dewdrops on the seedings in the field glisten like
countless eyes suddenly popping open. I dim the sun so that
dusk arrives earlier, then I stare at the silhouette of myself on
the distant horizon, in front of the setting sun.

I wave at the silhouette; the silhouette waves back. Looking at
the shadow of myself, I feel young again.

This is a lovely time, just right for remembering.

We don’t actually move forward in the proper chronology of the series until about 100 pages in, at the start of Part II, though the delay is by no means unpleasant. *Death’s End* tells a story with an even larger scope than the Fermi’s Paradox narrative that drove *The Dark Forest*, something approaching the realm of the religious or the theological. I suggested in the LARB review that the Three-Body trilogy might well be our *Star Maker*, Olaf Stapledon’s 1937 novel that uses a version of the consensus cosmogony to narrate a search for God, as the animating, transcendent spirit of love whose kindness might explain and justify a universe we experience as madness, cruelty, and horror. When Stapledon’s characters do find the Star Maker, unfortunately, he is more like an artist than a lover or a parent — a being in relentless pursuit of his own concepts of

aestheticized perfection, not really concerned all that about us at all. (“And yet I worshipped!” the narrator of *Star Maker* exclaims, in a mix of sublime awe and holy terror.)

Death's End is indeed our *Star Maker*: though exploring many of the same dread mysteries, it fully dispenses with the God hypothesis to which Stapledon clung, and tries to find some locus of hope anyway. If *The Three-Body Problem* was about science and the state, and *The Dark Forest* was about evolution and empire, *Death's End* is a post-Stapledonian search for benevolence in a cosmos where all optimism is broken down and undone by the universality of death: the individual, the state, the species, the planet, the sun, the galaxy, the heath-death of the universe.

The *Death's End* is thus the *Star Maker* of the Anthropocene, our moment, where the consensus future isn't *Star Trek* but *The World Without Us*, and where the last futurological debate is simply whether or not the next intelligent species that arises or finds the Earth will be able to recognize our ruins amid all the debris.

In English the “end” in *Death's End* looks like it might be a pun: it simultaneously suggests death's elimination and death's purpose. I don't speak or read Chinese, but I've gathered that in Chinese the title suggests a paradox closer to *Death Immortalized*, or *The Immortal Death*: a death that survives everything, an abstracted concept of death that itself never ends, that just dies and dies and dies. The reframing of human time into species time, as in the anticipatory evolutionary logic of the Anthropocene, is very much this sort of immortalized death, that turns everything that exists now into fossils and ruins, then imagines even that detritus being swept inexorably away by the erosion and decay of geologic forces. What hope might exist for life outside the sped-up time-lapse of such cosmic death, when everything dies, when even our mausoleums collapse and vanish, when even the *Star Maker* is dead?

It would be reductive and ethnocentric for a US critic to insist that works like the Three-Body Series, *The Fat Years*, or 2066: *Red Star Over America* are really about *us*, that despite its Chinese origins, *Death's End* is still fundamentally still about *our* genre history, *our* cultural traditions, *our* cosmic anxieties, *our* ever-accelerating imperial collapse into eco-ecological catastrophe and social disaster. Indeed, part of what makes Liu Cixin so dizzying and exhilarating is the way familiar science-fictional categories have been inflected by Chinese history, and by non-Western and in some basic sense anti-consumerist philosophical precepts and narrative conventions. It is crucial for the Western reader of Liu Cixin to remember that “we” are reading in translation.

Nonetheless, *Death's End* speaks directly to the apocalyptic imagination that now structures everything in the contemporary West, the sense that there is no hope to be found anywhere in a world where God doesn't exist, where nothing lasts, and where nothing was good enough in the first place to really want to keep around anyway.

Death's End's artistic triumph is its somber, melancholic, sublime search for some way out of the disaster of the present, towards a future not only of bare survival but of something almost like hope, a place where the turbo-capitalist bean-counting of accountants ensuring the proper distribution of suffering might someday be made to structure a different set of choices, where our noxious history and bad evolution and unhappiness towards death might not be the final word on human possibility (maybe). Of course it's a fantasy; as the Manifesto of the Committee to Abolish Outer Space has already patiently explained to an unhearing populace, *outer space doesn't even exist*. But it's also art, an absolute triumph, one of the most ambitious and magnificent works of either speculative or literary fiction to be published in decades. Read it. Now is a lovely time, just right for remembering what used to be the future.